

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 TEL AVIV 7674

EXDIS

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SUBJECT: REVIEWING THE SUCCESSION PICTURE

1. SUMMARY: SPECULATION CONCERNING THE CURRENT CABINET
ARGUMENT OVER THE TWO US QUESTIONS AND THE PRIME MINISTER'S
HEALTH SUGGESTS WE SHOULD AGAIN REVIEW THE SUCCESSION PICTURE.
VARIOUS SCENARIOS OF A BEGIN DEPARTURE COME TO MIND: A
RESIGNATION BECAUSE OF A POLITICAL CRISIS WITH THE US;
DISABLING ILLNESS, DURING WHICH YADIN WOULD BE ACTING PM,
FOLLOWED BY RESIGNATION; SUDDEN RESIGNATION BECAUSE OF
HEALTH; AND DEATH IN OFFICE. EZER WEIZMAN APPEARS PROMINENTLY
IN EVERY SUCCESSION SCENARIO. BUT HE IS STILL FAR FROM
EVEN MONEY AND RETAINS HIS LEAD LARGELY BY DEFAULT. NO
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CREDIBLE COMPETITION HAS YET EMERGED TO OVERTAKE HIM, BUT
THAT COULD HAPPEN WHEN BEGIN'S DEPARTURE OCCURS. IF WE HAD
TO MAKE A CHOICE AND IF BEGIN LEAVES THE SCENE IN THE NEXT
SIX MONTHS, WE WOULD PUT OUR MONEY ON EZER WEIZMAN, AND
SHIMON PERES, OR SIMCHA ERLICH, WITH WEIZMAN AS THE FAVORITE.
END SUMMARY.

2. SPECULATION CONCERNING THE CURRENT CABINET ARGUMENT OVER THE TWO US QUESTIONS AND THE PRIME MINISTER'S HEALTH SUGGESTS WE SHOULD AGAIN REVIEW THE SUCCESSION PICTURE. POLITICIANS AND EVEN JOURNALISTS ARE PUBLICLY CIRCUMSPECT ON THE SUBJECT OF BEGIN'S PHYSICAL STATE. HOWEVER, EVERY-ONE GOSSIPS IN THE SALONS HERE ABOUT THE PRIME MINISTER'S MARKEDLY DECLINING PHYSICAL CONDITION AND HIS OBVIOUSLY LOOSENED GRIP ON THE GOVERNMENT. THE PRESS IS UNINHIBITED IN SPECULATING ON THE POSSIBILITY OF A BEGIN RESIGNATION FOLLOWING A POLITICAL CRISIS WITH THE UNITED STATES, ESPECIALLY IN VIEW OF THE MANEUVERING IN THE CABINET THIS WEEK OVER THE TWO US QUESTIONS. IN DISCUSSING THE PROBLEM OF SUCCESSION, VARIOUS SCENARIOS OF A BEGIN DEPARTURE COME TO MIND, EACH WITH ITS OWN POLITICAL DYNAMIC AND MIX OF CONTENDERS.

3. BEGIN RESIGNATION BECAUSE OF THE POLITICAL CIRCSIS WITH US- IF BEGIN RESIGNED BECAUSE OF A HUMILIATING DEFEAT IN THE CABINET OR BECAUSE HIS PARLIAMENTARY MINORITY COLLAPSED THROUGH DEFECTION OF THE DMC, AND SOME OF THE LIBERALS, PRESIDENT NAVON WOULD ASK THE LEADER OF THE KNESSET'S LARGEST PARTY, LIKUD, TO ORGANIZE A NEW GOVERNMENT. HOWEVER, IN SUCH A CIRCUMSTANCE, THE ESSENCE OF HERUT POLICIES WOULD HAVE BEEN DISCREDITED AND IT WOULD NOT BE A SIMPLE MATTER FOR THE LIKUD TO CONSTRUCT ANOTHER COALITION, EVEN WITH BEGIN AGAIN AT ITS HEAD. BUT IT WOULD CERTAINLY TRY. HAVING FINALLY TASTED POWER AFTER TWENTY-CONFIDENTIAL

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NINE YEARS IN OPPOSITION, THE LIKUD WOULD NOT EASILY YIELD TO OTHERS. ALL THE SAME, BEGIN'S RESIGNATION WOULD PROBABLY MEAN HIS RETIREMENT FROM POLITICS. WITHOUT THE CEMENT OF BEGIN'S PERSONALITY, THE CONTRADICTIONS AMONG LIKUD'S COMPONENTS (MODERATION VERSUS HARDLINE; POPULISM VERSUS LIBERALISM) WOULD COME TO THE FORE. IN SUCH A CIRCUMSTANCE, THE MOST LIKELY MAN IN THE LIKUD TO HOLD THE PARTY TOGETHER WOULD BE EZER WEIZMAN.

4. IN MANY PEOPLES MINDS, WEIZMAN IS THE ONLY PERSONALITY IN THE PARTY WHO COULD REPLACE THE UNIFYING FORCE OF BEGIN. HE IS POPULAR WITH HERUT'S SEPHARDIC CONSTITUENCY, IF NOT WITH THE PARTY'S HARDLINERS. HE IS ACCEPTABLE TO THE LIBERALS. MORE THAN ANY OTHER HERUT CONTENDER HE IS A TESTED NATIONAL LEADER. HE IS CHARISMATIC AND STILL POPULAR IN THE COUNTRY AT LARGE. AND, HE HAS MADE IT CLEAR TO ISRAELIS DURING THESE PAST MONTHS THAT HE DOES NOT AGREE WITH BEGIN'S MANAGEMENT OF RELATIONS WITH EGYPT AND THE UNITED STATES.

5. HOWEVER, WEIZMAN WOULD CERTAINLY NOT HAVE AN EASY WALK TO THE TOP SPOT WITHIN LIKUD. HE IS RESENTED BY HERUT

PURISTS. ALSO, AS WE HAVE REPORTED, WEIZMAN'S OWN STATURE IN THE COUNTRY HAS DECLINED OVER THE LAST THREE MONTHS. AND FINALLY, OF COURSE, OTHER LIKUD POLITICIANS -- KNESSET SPEAKER YITZHAK SHAMIR AND MOSHE AHRENS OF HERUT AND LIBERAL LEADER SIMCHA EHRLICH -- WOULD ALSO BE COMPETING. BUT IF LIKUD MANAGED TO FORM ANOTHER GOVERNMENT, WE WOULD GIVE WEIZMAN THE EDGE AT GAINING BEGIN'S CHAIR.

6. THERE IS ANOTHER POSSIBILITY IF BEGIN RESIGNED BECAUSE OF A POLITICAL EXPLOSION WITH THE US IT IS POSSIBLE THAT LIKUD WOULD FAIL TO CONSTRUCT A GOVERNMENT, WOULD BE UNABLE TO UNIFY ITS DISPARATE ELEMENTS. IN PARTICULAR, IN THE EVENT OF A GOVERNMENT COLLAPSE, THE LIBERALS COULD WELL BE ENTICED INTO A COALITION OF THE CENTER MADE UP OF THEM-
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SELVES, LABOR AND THE DMC. IF THAT HAPPENED, SHIMON PERES, AS LEADER OF THE LABOR PARTY, WOULD BE THE STRONGEST CONTENDER FOR THE PRIME MINISTERSHIP. A BREAK-UP OF LIKUD WOULD MEAN THAT LABOR WOULD BECOME THE KNESSET'S SINGLE LARGEST PARTY. THUS, IT WOULD HAVE FIRST OPPORTUNITY AT FORMING A NEW GOVERNMENT. PERES DOESN'T EXCITE PARTICULAR ANIMOSITY AMONG EITHER THE LIBERALS OR THE DMC AND WOULD PROBABLY BE ACCEPTABLE TO BOTH PARTIES. FURTHER, HE HAS BEEN WORKING HARD OF LATE TO PUSH THE POINT THAT HE IS UNIQUELY CAPABLE OF REPAIRING RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES AND SETTING THE PEACE PROCESS BACK ON TRACK. HIS MAJOR DRAWBACK IS THAT HE HEADS A DEFEATED AND DISCREDITED PARTY WHICH HAS DONE LITTLE IN THE PAST YEAR TO REHABILITATE ITSELF WITH THE ISRAELI VOTERS, BUT HE COULD STILL MAKE A DEAL.

7. FINALLY, IN THIS SITUATION, EITHER WEIZMAN OR PERES COULD, IF THEY JUDGED THEY WOULD FALL SHORT THROUGH PARTISAN MEANS, CALL FOR A WALL-TO-WALL GOVERNMENT. SUCH A COALITION WOULD IN THE PRESENT DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES STRIKE A RESPONSIVE CHORD THROUGHOUT ISRAEL, AND WEIZMAN AND PERES WOULD COMPETE TO LEAD IT.

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8. DISABLING ILLNESS. IF BEGIN WERE TEMPORARILY DISABLED, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER YADIN WOULD BECOME ACTING PRIME MINISTER. ALTHOUGH THE LONGER HE ACTED AS PM THE BETTER WOULD BE HIS CHANCES OF EVENTUALLY TAKING THE JOB IN HIS OWN RIGHT, YADIN'S TENURE WOULD PROBABLY BE TEMPORARY. THE LAST SIX MONTHS HAVE DONE NOTHING TO ADVANCE HIS STATURE. HIS IMAGE HAS DETERIORATED IN HIS PARTY AND WITH THE GENERAL PUBLIC. HE IS A WEAK LEADER WHO HAS FAILED TO CONTROL THE CONFLICTING ELEMENTS IN THE DMC. WITHIN THE PARTY HE IS VIEWED AS A QUISLING WHO HAS SACRIFICED DMC PRINCIPLES FOR THE PERKS OF OFFICE. AND, LIKE HIS PARTY, HE HAS NOT LIVED UP TO THE REFORMING IMAGE WHICH THE PARTY CREATED IN THE 1977 CAMPAIGN. THUS YADIN WOULD PROBABLY FALL BY THE WAYSIDE.

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8. A VARIATION OF THIS POSSIBILITY IS A SUDDEN RESIGNATION BY BEGIN BECAUSE OF HEALTH. IN THAT CASE, HE WOULD NO DOUBT TRY TO PICK HIS SUCCESSOR OR, AT A MINIMUM ASSERT A STRONG INFLUENCE IN HIS SELECTION, AND THE ODDS WOULD FAVOR ONE OF BEGIN'S LOYAL LIEUTENANTS IN HERUT. LEADING THE PRIME MINISTER'S LIST COULD BE KNESSET SPEAKER SHAMIR. OF LATE HE IS INCREASINGLY MENTIONED AS A POSSIBLE SUCCESSOR. OF ALL CONTENDERS HE IS CLOSEST TO BEGIN PERSONALLY, AND OBSERVERS SEE A SHAMIR FACTION TAKING FORM IN HERUT. ALTHOUGH RELATIVELY NEW TO HERUT POLITICS, HIS POLITICAL SENSE IS JUDGED KEENER THAN THAT

OF WEIZMAN OR SHARON. HOWEVER, HE LACKS THE CHARISMA OF THE TWO EX-GENERALS AND HAS LITTLE APPEAL WITHIN THE LIKUD'S TWO OTHER FACTIONS. HE WOULD HAVE TROUBLE HOLDING THE LIKUD ITSELF INTACT, NOT TO MENTION THE PRESENT COALITION.

9. ANOTHER CANDIDATE FOR BEGIN'S NOD WOULD BE MOSHE AHRENS, CHAIRMAN OF THE KNESSET FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENSE COMMITTEE. MORE PRAGMATIC THAN THE PRIME MINISTER, HE NONETHELESS SHARES HIS HARDLINE AND IS VIEWED AS A LOYAL BEGIN FOLLOWER. HE COULD EMERGE AS AN ACCEPTABLE COMPROMISE IN A PROLONGED STRUGGLE WITHIN THE HERUT TO NAME A SUCCESSOR. BUT HE DOES NOT EXCITE THE PARTY PROS AND IS RELATIVELY UNKNOWN AMONGST THE ISRAELI PUBLIC AND ESPECIALLY INSIDE ISRAEL'S SEPHARDIC WORKING CLASS. HE IS A DISTANT OUTSIDER.

10. BEGIN MIGHT SUPPORT EHRLICH TO KEEP LIKUD IN POWER. HE HAS BEEN STEADFAST IN HIS LOYALTY TO BEGIN. HERUT WOULD FUME IN RAGE AT LOSING THE TOP SPOT, BUT UNLIKE THE LIBERALS WHO HAVE THE OPTION OF FORMING A CENTER COALITION, HERUT HAS NOWHERE ELSE TO GO. EHRLICH WOULD PROBABLY BE ABLE TO MAINTAIN THE LIBERAL-HERUT PARTNERSHIP. HOW-
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EVER, HIS IMAGE IN THE COUNTRY IS TOO GREY TO MAKE HIM A STRONG CONTENDER.

11. THAT BRINGS US BACK TO WEIZMAN AGAIN. HIS RELATIONS WITH BEGIN ARE POOR AND HE IS, AS WE NOTED, RESENTED BY HERUT'S VOCIFEROUS RIGHTWING. IF BEGIN WERE ABLE TO PICK HIS SUCCESSOR, IT WOULD NOT BE WEIZMAN. HOWEVER, IT IS POSSIBLE THAT IF NO OTHER HERUT CANDIDATE APPEARED ABLE TO HOLD LIKUD TOGETHER, THE PARTY WOULD TURN TO WEIZMAN AT THE END. AFTER ALL, DESPITE BEGIN'S DOMINANCE OF THE PARTY, IN SUCH CIRCUMSTANCES HE WOULD BE A SICK AND FAILING MAN. IT IS JUST POSSIBLE THAT WEIZMAN COULD PARLAY THAT AND HIS OWN STRENGTH WITH THE LIBERALS INTO SUCCESS.

12. DEATH IN OFFICE. WERE BEGIN TO DIE IN OFFICE, ESPECIALLY BEFORE HIS POLICIES WERE DISCREDITED, ISRAEL WOULD BE PLUNGED IN TRAUMA. IT WOULD BE A STATE OF SHOCK MORE SERIOUS THAN THAT WHICH OCCURRED WHEN LEVI ESHKOL DIED IN OFFICE BECAUSE THE TIMES ARE MORE DANGEROUS FOR THE COUNTRY. IN SUCH AN EVENT, A CLAMOR COULD ARISE FOR A MAN OF EXPERIENCE AND PROVEN ABILITY. SUCH A CIRCUMSTANCE WOULD AGAIN FAVOR THE WEIZMAN CANDIDACY. SHAMIR, AHRENS AND EHRLICH DO NOT POSSESS THE CONFIDENCE OF THE PUBLIC WHICH WOULD BE REQUIRED AT SUCH A DRAMATIC MOMENT. PERES WOULD ALSO HAVE A SHOT, BUT AGAIN, THE LIKUD WOULD HAVE TO FRACTURE FIRST. A WALL-TO-WALL COALITION COULD

NOT BE RULED OUT IN THIS CIRCUMSTANCE EITHER, AS IT COULD
SYMBOLIZE ISRAEL'S PULLING TOGETHER AT A MOMENT OF NATIONAL
AND HISTORIC CRISIS.

13. ALTHOUGH ANY SURVEY OF POSSIBLE SUCCESSORS TO BEGIN
SHOULD INCLUDE SOME MENTION OF DAYAN AND SHARON, WE REGARD
THEIR CHANCES IN ANY OF THESE SITUATIONS AS REMOTE. DAYAN
HAS A MINISCULE POWER BASE, IF THAT. PERHAPS EVEN MORE
IMPORTANT, THE CONTROVERSY THAT SWIRLS AROUND HIS PER-
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SONALITY AND HIS PERFORMANCE IN THE YOM KIPPUR WAR ARE
HANDICAPS TOO SEVERE TO OVERCOME. ONLY IN THE EVENT
THAT HE EMERGED AS THE HERO IN A CONFRONTATION WITH BEGIN OVER
THE PEACE PROCESS, COULD HE BE GIVEN EVEN LONG ODDS TO
SUCCEED TO THE PREMIERSHIP. SHARON IS EVEN LESS OF A CON-
TENDER. A DEVISIVE FORCE IN THE GOVERNMENT, HE IS LEADER
OF HERUT'S SUPER-HAWKS AND ADMIRER BY THE GUSH EMUNIM.
AS SUCH, SHARON IS UNACCEPTABLE TO JUST ABOUT EVERYONE
ELSE.

14. TO SUM UP, ALTHOUGH BEGIN HAS NO RECOGNIZED HEIR-
APPARENT, EZER WEIZMAN APPEARS PROMINENTLY IN EVERY SUC-
CESSION SCENARIO. THUS, THE ODDS FAVOR HIM. BUT HE IS
STILL FAR FROM EVEN MONEY, AND HE RETAINS HIS LEAD LARGELY
BY DEFAULT. NO CREDIBLE COMPETITION HAS YET EMERGED TO
OVERTAKE HIM, BUT THAT COULD WELL HAPPEN IF ANY OF THE
POSSIBILITIES ASSOCIATED WITH BEGIN'S DEPARTURE OCCUR.
BUT IF WE HAD TO MAKE A CHOICE, AND IF BEGIN LEAVES THE
SCENE IN THE NEXT SIX MONTHS, WE WOULD PUT OUR MONEY ON
EZER WEIZMAN, SHIMON PERES AND SIMCHA EHRLICH WITH
WEIZMAN THE FAVORITE.
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